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CHAPTER 7

THE WORLD INVISIBLE—(1)

The Santal village is organized to secure the greatest possible degree of co-operation not only in temporal affairs but also in dealing with the spirit world. The relationship between Santal society and some part of the universe inhabited by spirits is very close, and it is maintained by the society acting through its representatives. One of the most important officials in the village is the *nacke*, or village priest, whose business it is to maintain right relationships with the tribal spirits. A priest who was once asked whether he really believed in his work replied without any hesitation: "If I did not do my work the whole village would become sick!" His answer provides in effect a true summary of the Santal conception of the priest's work. He is a man apart, and he is conscious of his separation from his fellows. Alone of all the village officials he is not appointed by his fellow villagers, but by the *bongas*, the spirits that are worshipped. The investing of a new priest with the necessary authority occurs during the ceremonies following the death of his predecessor. The spirits take possession of the designated individual and so establish the identity of the new priest beyond any possibility of doubt. The marks of possession, the result of the process known to the Santals as *rum*, are quite familiar. *Rum* is the regular method by which the spirits reveal their wishes, convey comfort or warning, and assure the living of their fellowship with the spirits of the tribe and with their ancestors. The behaviour of a person who is possessed is similar to that of one who has suffered a sudden onslaught of insanity, and he speaks in the character of the spirit who has for the time being taken possession of his personality.

In spite of the supernatural origin of the priestly office, one finds that the spirits in making an appointment have been actuated largely by common-sense considerations. They usually ensure that the eldest son of the deceased priest assumes his father's functions, or, failing him, perhaps they will appoint a brother. One may discern two reasons why the succession is secured in this manner. In the first place, a son will have had special opportunities of watching his father at work, and having been brought up in the right atmosphere he is already familiar with the rules and customs that govern the office. Secondly, when the original distribution of lands was made in the new village, the first *nacke*, in common with the other officials, received

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794 87 191 179 178 from their aptitude at school in mastering the subject matter of their Bengali education and they are all too conscious of the early handicaps arising from bilingualism. They entertain a very natural ambition to give their children a better chance than they themselves have enjoyed, and so a number of them have banished the use of Santali from their homes. This is done not only to give their children a start in school, but also because they feel that if their children learn Santali first they will speak Bengali with a Santal, and therefore an uncultured, accent, on account of which they themselves have experienced the shafts of derision. In any case it is probable that owing to their education they find the Bengali language more adequate for the expression of many of their own needs. They are therefore predisposed to turn their backs on Santal culture and adopt modes of behaviour that are alien to the Santal village. The moral standards of individualism and those of a society where the individual counts for little have clashed in their lives and have not yet resulted in an equilibrium.

794 781 554 Nevertheless, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the Christian Church is making some contributions of real significance to the whole community through the new educated leadership which is also responsible for elements of real value in the life of the Christian Church itself. Among the leaders, as also among the rank and file, there is much genuine religious experience and sincere piety that issue in unselfish service to the village as a whole and to the Christian Church in particular. Chuneram Hembrom, a pensioner of the mission, wrote: "Now because of my age they have pensioned me on seven rupees a month. However, God and Jesus the Saviour of men have not deserted me. The spirit of my mind is cool (i.e., it is at peace). I believe that if we unite body and mind in prayer and ask anything in the name of Jesus it will be granted to us. All of us pray to Jesus Christ. Although my wife can neither read nor write, she prays with knowledge every evening and we are content. By our deeds and by our words we bring pain to God, but through Jesus we ask for forgiveness."[1] Many members of the second generation of Christians are active in a hundred local situations, serving their fellows. Some are revered by many generations of school children and are themselves proud of those whom they have helped to go farther on the road of learning than they themselves have travelled. In time of famine and sickness they spend themselves on behalf of their fellows and are trusted by all.

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[1] From a manuscript in my possession.